



THERE was once a girl named Betty Leicester, who was known first to the readers of St. Nicholas, and who afterward lived in a small square book bound in scarlet and white. I, who know her better than any one else does, and who know my way about Tideshead, the story-book town, as well as she did, and who have not only made many a call upon her Aunt Barbara and Aunt Mary in their charming old house, but have even seen the house in London where she spent the winter: I, who confess to loving Betty a good deal, wish to write a little more about her in this Christmas story. The truth is that ever since I wrote the first story I have been seeing girls who reminded me of Betty Leicester of Tideshead. Either they were about the same age or the same height, or they skipped gaily by me in a little gown like hers, or I saw a pleased look or

a puzzled look in their eyes which seemed to bring Betty, my own story-book girl, right before me.

Now, if anybody has read the book, this preface will be much more interesting than if anybody has not. Yet, if I say to all new acquaintances that Betty was just in the middle of her fifteenth year, and quite in the middle of girlhood; that she hated some things as much as she could, and liked other things with all her heart, and did not feel pleased when older people kept saying *don't!* perhaps these new acquaintances will take the risk of being friends. Certain things had become easy just as Betty was leaving Tideshead, where she had been spending the summer with her old aunts, so that, having got used to all the Tideshead liberties and restrictions, she thought she was leaving the easiest place in the world; but

when she got back to London with her father, somehow or other life was very difficult indeed.

She used to wish for London and for her cronies, the Duncans, when she was first in Tideshead; but when she was in England again she found that, being a little nearer to the awful responsibilities of a grown person, she was not only a new Betty, but London—great, busy, roaring, delightful London—was a new London altogether. To say that she felt lonely, and cried one night because she wished to go back to Tideshead and be a village person again, and was homesick for her four-posted bed with the mandarins parading on the curtains, is only to tell the honest truth.

In Tideshead that summer Betty Leicester learned two things which she could not understand quite well enough to believe at first, but which always seem more and more sensible to one as time goes on. The first is that you must be careful what you wish for, because if you wish hard enough you are pretty sure to get it; and the second is, that no two people can be placed anywhere where one will not be host and the other guest. One will be in a position to give and to help and to show; the other must be the one who depends and receives.

Now, this subject may not seem any clearer to you at first than it did to Betty; but life suddenly became a great deal more interesting, and she felt herself a great deal more important to the rest of the world when she got a little light from these rules. For everybody knows that two of the hardest things in the world are to know what to do and how to behave; to know what one's own duty is in the world and how to get on with other people. What to be and how to behave—these are the questions that every girl has to face, and if somebody answers, "Be good and be polite," it is such a general kind of answer that one throws it away and feels uncomfortable.

I do not remember that I happened to say anywhere in the story that there was a pretty fashion in Tideshead, as summer went on, of calling our friend "Sister Betty." Whether it came from her lamenting that she had no sister, and being kindly adopted by certain friends, or whether there was something in her

friendly, affectionate way of treating people, one cannot tell.

Betty Leicester, in a new winter gown which had just been sent home from Liberty's, with all desirable qualities of color, and a fine expanse of smocking at the yoke, and some sprigs of embroidery for ornament in proper places, was yet an unhappy Betty. In spite of being not only fine, but snug and warm as one always feels when cold weather first comes and one gets into a winter dress, everything seemed disappointing. The weather was shivery and dark, the street into which she was looking was narrow and gloomy, and there was a moment when Betty thought wistfully of Tideshead as if there were no December there, and only the high, clear September sky that she had left. Somehow, all out-of-door life appeared to have come to an end, and she felt as if she were shut into a dark and wintry prison. Not long before this she had come from Whitby, the charming red-roofed Yorkshire fishing-town that forever climbs the hill to its gray abbey. There were flocks of young people at Whitby that autumn, and Betty had lived out-of-doors in pleasant company to her heart's content, and tramped about the moors and along the cliffs with gay parties, and played golf and cricket, and helped to plan some great excitement or lively excursion for almost every day. There is a funny, dancing-step sort of walk, set to the tune of "Humpty-Dumpty," which seems to belong with the Whitby walking-sticks which everybody carries; you lock arms in lines across the road, and keep step to the gay chant of the dismal nursery lines, and the faster you go, especially when you are tired, the more it seems to rest you (or that's what some people think) in the long walks home. Whitby was almost as good as Tideshead, to which lovely town Betty now compared every other, even London itself.

Betty and her father had not yet gone to house-keeping by themselves (which made them very happy later on), but they were living in some familiar old Clarges Street lodgings convenient to the Green Park, where Betty could go for a consoling scamper with a new dog called "Toby" because he looked so exactly like the

beloved Toby on the cover of *Punch*. Betty had spent a whole morning's work upon a proper belled ruff for Toby, who gravely sat up and wore it as if he were conscious of literary responsibilities.

Papa had gone to the British Museum that rainy morning, and was not likely to reappear before the close of day. For a wonder, he was going to dine at home that night. Something very interesting to the scientific world had happened to him during his summer visit to Alaska, and it seemed as if every one of his scientific friends had also made some discovery, or something had happened to each, which made many talks and dinners and club meetings delightfully important. But most of the London people were in the country; for in England they stay in the hot town until July or August, when all Americans scatter among green fields or seashore places; and then spend the gloomy months of the year in their country-houses, when we fly back to the shelter and music and pictures and companionship of town life. This all depends upon the meeting of Parliament and other great reasons; but even Betty Leicester felt quite left out and lonely in town that dark day. Her best friends, the Duncans, were at their great house in Warwickshire. She was going to stay with them for a month, but not just yet; while papa himself was soon going to pay a short visit to a very great lady indeed at Danesly Castle, just this side the Border.

This "very great lady indeed" was perfectly charming to our friend; a smile or a bow from her was just then more than anything else to Betty. We all know how perfectly delightful it is to love somebody so much that we keep dreaming of her a little all the time, and what happiness it gives when the least thing one has to do with her is a perfectly golden joy. Betty loved Mrs. Duncan fondly and constantly, and she loved Aunt Barbara with a spark of true enchantment and eager desire to please her; but for this new friend—for Lady Mary Danesly (who was Mrs. Duncan's cousin)—there was something quite different in her heart. As she stood by the window in Clarges street she was thinking of this lovely friend, and wishing for once that she herself was older, so that

perhaps she might have been asked to come with papa for a week's visit at Christmas. But Lady Mary would be busy enough with her great house-party of distinguished people. Once she had been so delightful as to say that Betty must come some day to Danesly with her father, but of course this could not be the time. Miss Day, Betty's old governess, who now lived with her mother in one of the suburbs of London, was always ready to come to spend a week or two if Betty were to be left alone, and it was every year pleasanter to try to make Miss Day have a good time as well as to have one one's self; but, somehow, a feeling of having outgrown Miss Day was hard to bear. They had not much to talk about except the past, and what they used to do; and when friendship comes to this alone, it may be dear, but is never the best sort.

The fog was blowing out of the street, and the window against which Betty leaned was suddenly flecked with raindrops. A telegraph boy came round the corner as if the gust of wind had brought him, and ran up the steps; presently the maid brought a telegram in to Betty, who hastened to open it, as she was always commissioned to do in her father's absence. To her surprise it was meant for herself. She looked at the envelope to make sure. It was from Lady Mary:

*Can you come to me with your father next week, dear? I wish for you very much.*

"There's no answer—at least there's no answer now," said Betty, quite trembling with excitement and pleasure; "I must see papa first, but I can't think that he will say no. He meant to come home for Christmas day with me, and now we can both stay on." She hopped about, dancing and skipping, after the door was shut. What a thing it is to have one's wishes come true before one's eyes! And then she asked to have a hansom cab called and for the company of Pagot, who was her maid and helper now; a very nice woman whom Mrs. Duncan had recommended, inasmuch as Betty was older and had thoughts of going to housekeeping in the winter. Pagot's sister also was engaged as housemaid, and, strange as it may appear, our Tideshead Betty

was about to engage a cook and buttons. Pagot herself looked sedate and responsible, but she dearly liked a little change and was finding the day dull. So presently they started off together toward the British Museum in all the rain, with the shutters of the cab down and the horse trotting along the shining streets as if he liked it.

Mr. Leicester was in the Department of North American Prehistoric Remains, and had a jar of earth before him which he was examining with closest interest. "Here 's a bit of charred bone," he was saying eagerly to a wise-looking old gentleman, "and here 's a funeral bead—just as I expected. This proves my theory of the sacrificial— Why, Betty, what 's the matter?" and he looked startled for a moment. "A telegram? Oh,—"

"It was so very important, you see, papa," said Betty.

"I thought it was bad news from Tideshead," said Mr. Leicester, looking up at her with a smile after he had read it. "Well, my dear, that 's very nice, and very important too," he added, with a fine twinkle in his eyes. "I shall be going out for a bit of luncheon presently, and I 'll send the answer with great pleasure."

Betty's cheeks were brighter than ever, as if a rosy cloud of joy were shining through. "Now that I 'm here, I 'll look at the arrowheads; may n't I, papa?" she asked, with great self-possession. "I should like to see if I can find one like mine—I mean my best white one that I found on the river-bank last summer."

Papa nodded, and turned to his jar again. "You may let Pagot go home at one o'clock," he said, "and come back to find me here, and we 'll go and have luncheon together. I was thinking of coming home early to get you. We 've a house to look at, and it 's dull weather for what I wish to do here at the museum. Clear sunshine is the only possible light for this sort of work," he added, turning to the old

gentleman, who nodded; and Betty nodded sagely, and skipped away with Pagot, to search among the arrowheads.

She found many hundreds of the white quartz arrowpoints and spearheads like her own treasure. Pagot thought them very dull, and was made rather uncomfortable by the Indian medicine-masks and war-bonnets and evil-looking war-clubs, and openly called it a waste of time for any one to have taken trouble to get all that heathen rubbish together. Such savages and their horrid ways were best forgotten by decent folks, if Pagot might be so bold as to say so. But presently it was luncheon-time; and the good soul cheerfully departed, while Betty joined her father, and waited for him as still as a mouse for half an hour, while he and the scientific old gentleman reluctantly said their last words and separated. She had listened to a good deal of their talk about altar-fires, and the ceremonies that could be certainly traced in a handful of earth from the site of a temple in a crumbled city; but all her thoughts were of Lady Mary and the pleasures of the next week. She looked again at the telegram, which was much nicer than most telegrams. It was so nice of Lady Mary to have said *dear* in it—just as if she were talking; people did not often say *dear* in a message. "Perhaps some of her guests can't come; but then, everybody likes to be asked to Danesly," Betty thought. "And I wonder if I shall ever dine at table with the guests; I never have. At any rate, I shall see Lady Mary often and be with papa. It is perfectly lovely! I can give her the Indian basket I brought her now, before the sweet grass is all dry." It was a great delight to be asked to the holiday party; many a grown person would be thankful to take Betty's place. For was not Lady Mary a very great lady indeed, and one of the most charming women in England?—a famous hostess and assembler of really delightful people?

"I am asked to Danesly on the seventeenth," said Betty to herself, with satisfaction.

(To be continued.)

## A CHRISTMAS WHITE ELEPHANT.

BY W. A. WILSON.

FRED was in a sad quandary. There were certain things in the house which managed themselves, that is, were attended to by Agnes, his wife. There were others which required careful and judicious treatment, he said. These were left to him, of course. He found them, usually, more or less disagreeable. This case, however, was particularly difficult to deal with; the more so as it was plain to him that not only his own feelings, but those of Cecie, his little five-year-old daughter, had become involved. Now, he was much attached to his only child, and, whatever might happen to his own feelings, he objected to hers being wounded in any way. The situation, therefore, became more and more perplexing. As a natural consequence, he put off, from day to day, deciding what was to be done.

Agnes had expressed herself with her customary decision. "We simply cannot keep it in the house," she said, one evening when Fred went into the matter once for all.

"That is true," admitted her husband.

"Very well, then; we may as well get rid of it at once," she concluded.

"Yes, but how?" asked Fred, with an air of clinching the matter with a question she would find it difficult to answer.

"How? That is simple enough, surely."

"Don't see it."

"Why, open the door and put it out."

"Wh-a-at!" cried Fred, "and let it *die* in the yard?"

"Why, yes. You don't need to be so silly about it."

"Silly about it! Silly about it!! It's all very well to say 'silly' about it, but I could n't do it. I could n't sleep at nights. It's a good thing Cecie is not here to hear her mother."

"Really, Fred, it seems to me that you are driving matters a little too far," remarked Agnes, in a tone of great severity.

"Driving! That's not bad. I am not driving. I am being driven," said Fred, pleased however that he seemed to have the better of the argument.

"Well, I don't know," she said. "You agree that it cannot stay, and yet you object to letting it go."

"I do nothing of the kind," said Fred, helplessly. "I only said it was n't feasible. It simply cannot be put out to die. It does n't cost much to feed it, you must admit."

"That is true," said Agnes; "but that has nothing to do with it. Surely there is no use going over all the reasons again."

"Then," said Fred, in desperation, "let us get a man to take it out into the country somewhere and leave it to its fate. Perhaps some one would take a fancy to it," he added, rising.

"That would cost more than it is worth. Besides, it is a good thing Cecie is not here to hear her father," laughed Agnes, and the subject was allowed to drop once more.

Fred felt that the matter was becoming serious. If Agnes were so unreasonable, what would Cecie say to a proposal to turn her newly found friend out of doors? If it had only not been so very large!

Cecie had become quite a personage of importance in the household. Her father was reminded so often of himself by things she said and did, that he strove in every way to protect her from being, as he called it, badly used: that is, from being misconstrued and misunderstood. A strong feeling had, consequently, grown up between them. This case, this Green White Elephant of a Christmas-tree, was a characteristic instance. Only Cecie could have caused such a fuss about such a trifle. The more he thought about it the more ridiculous

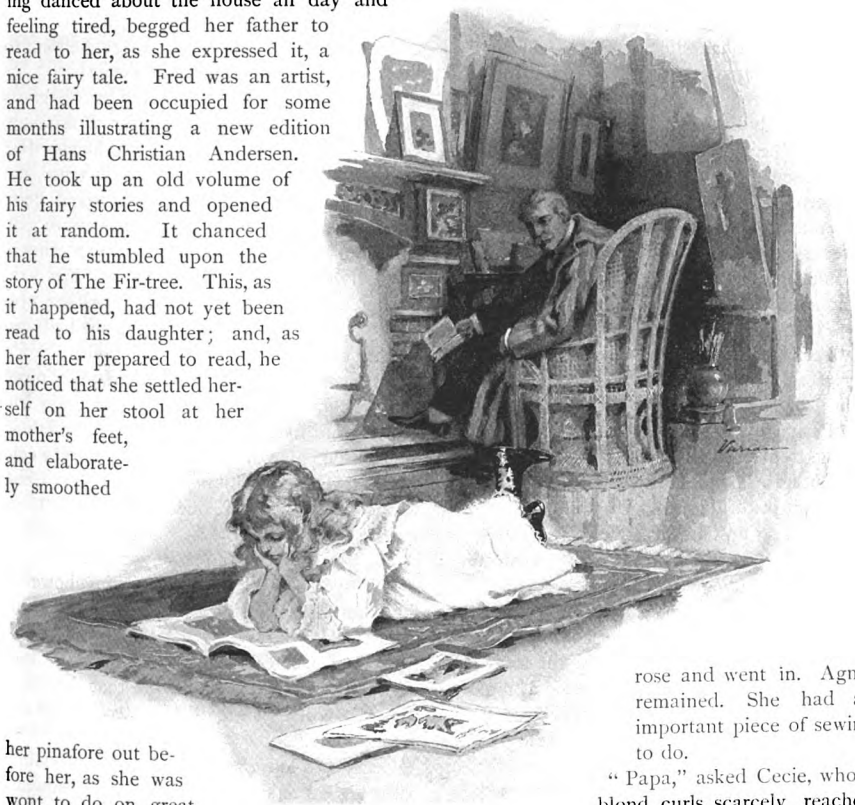
it seemed. Yet, as he said, it was easier to laugh than to say what was to be done.

Toward the end of the previous month, Robin, a friend, having sent a present consisting of a large Christmas-tree growing in an earthen pot, Fred went into town — unknown, of course, to Cecie — to purchase decorations for it. The same evening that young lady, having danced about the house all day and feeling tired, begged her father to read to her, as she expressed it, a nice fairy tale. Fred was an artist, and had been occupied for some months illustrating a new edition of Hans Christian Andersen. He took up an old volume of his fairy stories and opened it at random. It chanced that he stumbled upon the story of *The Fir-tree*. This, as it happened, had not yet been read to his daughter; and, as her father prepared to read, he noticed that she settled herself on her stool at her mother's feet, and elaborately smoothed

on, and Cecie listened. When he had finished she surprised him by saying nothing. She sat quite still, and seemed to have become very thoughtful. After a time she rose and went quietly into the room where the Christmas-tree was standing.

Presently a small voice called out: "Papa!"

Fred, suspecting what had happened,



her pinafore out before her, as she was wont to do on great occasions: for no occasion was so great to Cecie as the first reading of a new fairy tale.

He did not stop to think. It did not occur to him precisely what the result of reading that particular story at that particular time would most likely be. Otherwise, he would probably have kept it for another day. But he did not; he read innocently

rose and went in. Agnes remained. She had an important piece of sewing to do.

"Papa," asked Cecie, whose blond curls scarcely reached the lowest branches of the tree, "it never moves, does it?"

"No, dear."

"And it is alive just like us?"

"Yes. That is—well, yes; not

exactly, you know, but it is quite alive."

"What does it feed on all the time, then?"

"The juices of the earth," said Fred, with the air of an experienced gardener. "That is why we must give it water. It requires air,

"CECIE WAS DEEPLY ENGROSSED IN AN ILLUSTRATED SPELLING-BOOK." (SEE PAGE 115.)

too, for it sucks moisture in with these, as well." And he pinched the branch nearest him, and a few needles came off between his fingers.

"Does n't that hurt the tree?" cried Cecie.

"Oh, no; it won't mind that."

"Would n't it like some juices just now, papa?"

"I think not. The earth is moist enough."

"Oh, let me! I'll go and get some water," said Cecie, starting toward the door.

"No, no; it has sufficient."

"But perhaps it would like a long drink. I do, sometimes," pleaded the little girl, in tones which usually had the desired effect.

"No!" said the head of the family, to satisfy himself that he could be firm occasionally.

There was a pause. Cecie stood still, looking up at the handsome stranger as if she had never seen a tree before. "Do you think it hears us talking about it, papa?" she said after a moment.

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps it is asleep," she suggested, moving closer to her father and putting her little hand in his.

"Perhaps it is," said Fred, feeling that, after all, the tree might as well have had some water.

"But how does it sleep when it has no eyes?"

"Oh, it just sleeps in its own way."

"Standing up like that always?"

"Yes, just as, just as—let me see—as horses do, for example."

"Oh, but horses don't always," retorted Cecie; because the baker had told her, the other day, that his horse lay down on the straw and went to sleep whenever it got home at night.

"They sometimes do," observed Fred, in the interests of parental authority, meaning at the first opportunity to get reliable information on the subject of the private life of horses.

"Then will it like to live with us?"

Fred thought it would, if they were kind to it.

"And we will be kind to it, won't we?"

"Of course we will," Fred promised in the innocence of his heart, for he was a child of nature himself, fond of flowers and trees and everything that lived a free and healthy life.

Then Cecie said good-night to her tree, "and pleasant dreams"; and when she had closed the door for the night and left her new friend

alone, she went contentedly away with her nurse; and Fred sat down, blissfully unconscious that he had committed himself in any way.

The following forenoon, after struggling for an hour to get into his work, Fred had just got fairly settled when he was startled by a fall, a crash of crockery, and a loud wail in the room adjoining his studio. Laying down his drawing-board and pen, with a sigh, he went to the folding doors and opened them.

Cecie had already been picked up. She was standing like a little model for a statuette, holding out her limp and dripping hands. Her pinafore and dress were soaked with water, and there was a pond on the bright waxed floor, dotted with islands of broken stoneware jug. The cat in the center of the further room was excitedly licking its back. Cecie's lips were puckered up in great distress, and her eyes were lost in a spasm of tears, for she had startled no one more than she had herself.

Fred could not help smiling. He bent down and comforted her, and, after the tears had ceased, said that to prevent confusion in future, either he or mama, or at all events nurse, would see that the tree got sufficient water. Cecie was to give herself no concern whatever. There was no need to trouble herself about it. Would she be good and not do so any more?

"Y-y-yes," promised Cecie, feeling, however, that she was promising away her entire interest in life.

"Oh, I will tell you," said Fred. "Every evening at tea-time remind me that the tree is thirsty. Nurse can fetch us water, and we can give it some."

Cecie was led away for a change of clothes with an expression on her face like sunshine breaking through the clouds on an April day. Fred, with a reflection of it glistening in his eyes, went back to his room and took up his board.

That evening he was busy decorating the tree for some time after Cecie had gone to sleep.

The next evening was Christmas eve; but when the happy moment arrived, and the doors were flung open, disclosing the tree in a blaze

of light, Cecie did not seem to rise to the occasion quite so enthusiastically as her parents had expected; and yet this was not only the largest but the finest tree she had ever had. Cecie, however, was not one who could be gay to order; and with her the unexpected usually happened. This time it was not that she did not think her protégé beautiful. She was divided between admiration and another feeling. She was wondering if it would care to be lighted up with candles within an inch of its life like that, and covered with glittering ornaments till it could scarcely breathe; whether it liked to have molten wax run all over its fresh green branches; and whether it were being treated with proper respect in being made to hold up such a load of things.

Fred laughed heartily when she confided her anxieties to him, and said, "Oh, that won't matter. Don't mind that, little woman."

"But don't you remember that the story said when trees had barkache it was as bad as headache is to us?"

"Oh, but it is strong," said her father. "It does n't feel such little things."

"Well, I would have barkache — headache, I mean," said Cecie, laughing at her slip, "if I had to carry all these burning candles."

Later, when the little party had broken up and Fred was left alone, he sat down in an easy-chair. A question had occurred to him while Cecie was speaking. This tree of hers — what was to be done with it when its time came?

He and mama had no means of disposing of it, living in the city as they did, and it could not be kept in the house. Moreover, Cecie would require to know what had been done with it. Previous Christmas-trees had had their death-blows dealt them in the forest. With this one it was different. It was not only still living, but, thanks to Cecie, was becoming from day to day more and more a personality in the house.

Parents, he reflected, really ought to remember to tell their children, when talking of the duty of kindness to all dumb creatures, that there are exceptions to every rule — that is to say, if they wish to avoid drifting into ridiculous situations. To think of the father of a family hesitating about such a paltry thing as

this! He looked up at the moment, and his eyes fell upon the tree. How beautiful it certainly was, in spite of all the finery and tinsel!

Cecie was an odd child! However, when Christmas was over, other things would distract her attention, he hoped, and then it would be time enough to — well, that could be determined when the time came. Perhaps something would turn up before then. Perhaps the thing would decide itself in some way.

The next day, being Christmas, was a holiday. Fred sat reading in his easy-chair before the studio fire. Cecie, not far away, lay upon the floor, propping her head up with her arms, deeply engrossed in an illustrated spelling-book. For a few moments there was no sound but the grave beat of the old timepiece hanging on the wall and the nervous ticking of two modern clocks in the adjoining room. A thin fall of snow had slid down the studio windows and collected at the bottom of the panes.

Presently Fred laid down his book, and said, over his shoulder: "Where is Dolly to-day?"

"She 's asleep just now," she said, rising and going to her father's side. "She 's been making plum-pudding." Taking the watch from her father's pocket, and holding it sideways, she continued:

"What time is it?"

"A quarter past three."

"But you said it was twelve when the hands were together."

"Yes; but when they are together at the top."

Cecie gave it up. Replacing the watch, she said, in an altered tone of voice: "Papa!"

"Well, dear?"

"Trees don't care for anything but growing, do they?"

"Well, I don't know that they care much even for that. They have to grow just as you, just as I, must do."

"Must you grow, papa?"

"I? Well, I suppose I am done growing now," said Fred.

"Will you never grow, never any more?" asked Cecie, so seriously that her father turned around and looked at her, and smiled.

"Well, dear," he said, stroking her hair, "it



would n't do, you know, if we never stopped. Think how big we should get to be!"

Cecie burst into a gay laugh. "We could n't get in by the door, unless we bent down and crept in on our hands and knees, could we?"

"Of course we could n't," laughed Fred.

"But it is funny, too, that we have to stop growing. Tell me, papa," she continued, looking earnestly at him, "are you *very* old?"

"Who? I?" said Fred, aghast. "No—of course not. I am quite young."

"How old is old, then?"

"Old? Let me see. Fifty is old, or sixty—thereabouts," said Fred.

After a silence Cecie began again:

"Will I ever be old, papa?"

"Why, certainly, my dear," said Fred, cheerfully; "that is," he added, as if feeling guilty of some vague ungallantry, "I hope so."

"And never grow any more, like you?"

"Y-yes."

"But would n't you like to keep growing always?"

"I don't know. I feel pretty comfortable as I am. If I were a little girl like you it might be different."

"Do people only want to grow when they are young?"

Fred shifted in his chair, and then, drawing her closer to him, said: "Why do you ask about the tree caring to grow?"

"Because you read in the story that the tree said to itself: 'Let me grow, only let me grow; there is nothing so beautiful in all the world.'"

"I don't remember."

"Wait, and I will get the book," said Cecie. She returned with the volume, which she had opened at the proper place, and declared that it was at the very beginning.

"How did you know that that is the place?"

"Because the picture of the tree is there," replied the child, simply.

Fred patted her on the cheek, and ran his eye rapidly down the page. At length he said:

"Oh, yes, you are right. Here it is:

"Be happy," said the Sunshine, "that you are young. Rejoice in your growth, and in the young life that is within you." And the Wind kissed the tree by day, and the Dew wept over it by night: but the Fir-tree did not understand."

"What did n't it understand?" asked Cecie.

"Oh, I don't know," said her father carelessly.

"I know."

"What, then?"

"That some day it would stop growing, like you, and might want to grow some more, and could n't," cried Cecie, breaking into a dance of joy; for she had a great belief that her father knew nearly everything, and it was a great treat to her to be able to tell him something he did not know.

Finally, as if by way of further relieving her feelings, she caught up one foot, and hopped round the studio, and out at the open door.

As she did so, Fred's book slipped from his knee and fell. He picked it up again, but laid it on the table. Resuming his chair, he sat for some time with his head resting on his hand, looking absently at the fire.

Cecie sometimes had fits of not knowing what to do with her limbs; or it might, perhaps, be more correct to say that her limbs had fits of not knowing what to do with themselves and her. At one moment she would be seen lounging about like a marionette, hanging on her father or mother or whoever happened to be near. The next minute she had gone. She was likely, however, to reappear at any moment, like a kitten, the innocent victim of some strange galvanic power.

These moods had the additional peculiarity of usually occurring when every one else was disposed to be quiet. This occasion being no exception, Fred was soon startled from his reverie by warm lips sending a sudden "Boo-o-o!" near his ear.

"What's the matter?" he cried out, twitching as if from an electric shock.

Cecie applied her lips to his ear again.

"I don't know," he said, laughing, and rubbing at once energetically.

"Guess!"

"Can't. There is n't anything forgotten."

"Oh, yes, there is," said Cecie, and whispering a second time.

"Oh, not just now, I think," said Fred, smiling, as she retreated a pace to watch the effect of the joyful communication.



"THE TREE WAS CEREMONIOUSLY AND MOST DELICATELY WATERED, TO THE COMPLETE SATISFACTION OF ITS PATRONESS."

"But you said you would."

"It won't require any water to-day."

"Oh, yes. You know it has all the candles and things to hold."

Fred rose resignedly, and went into the room, and the tree was ceremoniously and most

delicately watered, to the complete satisfaction of its patroness.

It was large enough, certainly (its top just touched the ceiling of the room in which it stood), but it was very kind of Robin, Fred reflected, to have sent such a handsome tree. If,

therefore, this newly born enthusiasm of Cecie's for growing were to be encouraged, it might soon be necessary to take her friend into the studio. But that was entirely out of the question. He could not afford the space. Sooner or later he must come to a decision. There seemed to be no resource but to break it up for fire-wood. Cecie could be sent for a walk while that was being done. Who was to do it, however? It was not work for his wife, and he—well, he did not care to do it. He was not accustomed to use an ax, for one thing; besides, work of that sort was bad for an artist's hands.

Nurse would do it. Why not? She was a great, strong woman.

It was not until the first week of the New Year, when the mistletoe and holly and other relics of Christmas were being cleared away, that the subject of their silent visitor came up again.

If Cecie would only tire of it, he would say to himself at times, or if it would only die! Of the latter, unfortunately, there seemed to be very little prospect, unless, indeed, it died by drowning. Thanks to Cecie's watchfulness, there seemed a distant possibility of that.

Once he pulled himself together, and, without daring to address himself directly to his daughter, spoke about the matter, in a seemingly casual manner, in her presence.

"What shall we do when the tree is away?" he said to mama.

"It is n't going away, is it, papa?" asked Cecie, looking up in great surprise. "You said it was to be allowed to stay."

"Certainly, my dear. I mean, what would we have done if it had been going away?"

Cecie's calmness had quite disarmed him.

"Where could it have gone, poor thing?" asked Cecie, tenderly.

"I-don't-know," said Fred, hopelessly.

Again he and Agnes were talking obscurely about it, so that the child might not understand.

Presently Cecie said in a low whisper:

"S-sh, mama, s-sh! Don't talk like that. The tree might hear you, and think you were talking about *it*."

"But, my dear," said her mother, seizing the

opportunity, "we *are* talking about it." Suddenly lowering her voice, in response to an expression in Cecie's face, she added:

"Something must be done, you know. It cannot stay here always."

"Then," said Cecie in a hoarse whisper to her father, who had begun to crumble bread upon the table-cloth, "why did you let it hear you say it could, Papa?"

"Me, dear? I did n't."

"Yes, you did; the first night it came," persisted Cecie, her eyes filling suddenly.

"Did I? Well, but we don't need to chop it up, you know," said Fred, soothingly.

"Chop it up!" cried Cecie, horrified. "Who said we would chop it up?"

"Why, why,—nobody. Did nurse say so?"

"Nurse? Why, no. She loves it as much as I do now, ever since I told her," said Cecie.

"Oh! I did n't know," said the victim, feeling that the toils were closing around him, and beginning to wonder if Hunding found it inconvenient to have a tree growing through the roof of his abode. It might look picturesque at least, if the worst came to the worst.

"Poor thing!" said Cecie, turning to their helpless charge; "we promised to be kind to you, and we will, won't we?"

Neither Fred nor Agnes said a word. They felt that their best course was to wait.

Cecie, however, made it difficult for them at the outset by saying good-night to her tree that evening with even more kindness in her voice than usual.

Fred complained to Agnes afterward, as they sat alone together, that it was impossible to work when one was constantly distracted by the small things of life. Agnes said, "Stuff and nonsense!" Moreover, she added, laughing, it was absurd to call Cecie's tree a small thing of life. It was already too large, and, what was worse, seemed to be growing larger.

It was no wonder, therefore, that Fred was in a great quandary.

Whenever he chanced to see the tree, standing on its stool, so submissive or so indifferent, he could not quite make out which, but certainly so undeniably fresh and healthy-looking, his conscience gave a twinge. He began to

avoid the "prison," as Agnes jestingly called the room in which it stood; for when he met the tree face to face, he always thought of the Good Robber, and how he must have felt when he took the Babes by the hand and led them to the Wood; and when he heard nurse watering it and spraying its branches twice a day, he winced, for he had delegated the work to her in the steadfast hope that she would forget to do it.

Once, with a bitter remembrance of this, he said to Agnes, who had complained of her neglect: "Yes, she does nothing she is told to do, that girl."

"Oh, papa," broke in Cecie, who happened to be in a corner of the room, "you can't say that. Look at the way she keeps the tree. Why, there are buds upon it already!"

At another time, Agnes, who had just decided to take the law into her own hands and give orders for the execution, without say-

ing anything either to Cecie or her husband, was busy arranging her bookcase, when Fred looked up from the letter he was writing and said: "S-sh! Who is that in the next room?"

"It is only Cecie."

"But she is talking to some one."

Agnes laid down the book she was dusting, and, going softly to the door, stood still and listened. As she did so, a curious look, that was half smile and half something else, crossed her face.

"They are having a great time in there," she said in a lowered tone, coming away from the door. "Cecie is telling it a long story about a walk she had in the park with nurse."

Agnes resumed her work amongst the books, and decided that in the mean time there was no hurry. The tree could remain where it was for a day or two longer.

At last, at the eleventh hour, quite unexpectedly, a solution of the difficulty arrived.

(To be concluded.)

## THE STORY of THE YEAR,

A COMEDY IN FIVE ACTS

